

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

January 8, 2014

Spokane justice commission report complete

Mike Prager

The Spokesman-Review

Tags: criminal justice reform Spokane County commissioners Spokane Regional Criminal Justice Commission



Now that the Spokane Regional Criminal Justice Commission has completed its yearlong report, top officials at Spokane County and Spokane City Hall are getting ready to sit down and decide which of its numerous recommendations to tackle first.

County Commissioner Todd Mielke said he is going to meet with Mayor David Condon and members of the commission Friday to talk about the next steps.

Online

Download a copy of the report at www.spokanecounty.org/srcjc (<http://www.spokanecounty.org/srcjc>).

The 60-page report was completed Dec. 31. It calls for numerous reforms and efficiency measures to cut criminal justice costs and help offenders turn their lives around.

A key recommendation is creation of a new Regional Justice Commission to oversee reforms and hold public officials accountable.

The final report said a new commission must be given “the authority to dictate and accomplish those changes necessary to improve our region’s justice system. In short, the (commission) must be free from the politics that now hamper progress.”

Mielke said sorting through the recommendations and deciding what to tackle first is going to be the challenge. He wants to focus on the cost of handling felony cases, but city officials are eager to reduce misdemeanor costs.

About 70 percent of the county’s general tax budget and 50 percent of Spokane city’s budget go for criminal justice, including law enforcement.

The three-member Criminal Justice Commission was appointed jointly by the city and county in November 2012. The members spent a year meeting with representatives of law

enforcement, prosecution, defenders, courts, probation, community services, treatment programs and citizens.

The panel studied practices shown to improve delivery of criminal justice, and their final report calls for using best practices to lower costs and reduce crime.

Commission member Phillip Wetzel, a longtime criminal attorney, said a key to enacting reforms is empowering a new commission to review performance of public officials and issue reports on progress.

Beyond that, he said, reform “has to come from the leadership of the mayor, City Council and County Commission.”

The commission calls for diversion programs to get low-level offenders into treatment. It also recommends a risk and needs assessment of offenders when they are arrested to get them into appropriate programs.

Plans to ask voters to support construction of a new jail should be put on hold until reforms have a chance to work, the commission said.

However, the commission supports construction of a community corrections center to handle diversions and alternatives to jail sentencing.

Get more news and information at Spokesman.com